

A VISIT TO THE SCENE OF COMUS.



To the county of Salop commend us for the loveliest of English scenery; and where can anybody point out a prettier town than the ancient borough of Ludlow? Planted on the heights of a steep line of rocks which form the western extremity of the extensive knoll on which the town is built, in a position which at one time must have been all but impregnable, the towers of Ludlow Castle present to us from their summit in a grand sweep of country from west to east, one of the noblest and richest of panoramas. In the latter direction rises the bold mass of the Titterstone Clee Hill. More to the north we look over Corve Dale and the picturesque mixture of wood and bank which conceals from our view the pleasant village of Stanton Lacy, while our eyes wander over hill after hill which form its background, until they are almost lost in the distance. More directly north, the valley of the beautiful Teme lies before us, and we see beyond into that of the Oney, with their no less picturesque villages of Bromfield and Onybury, and a still more hilly background, ending in the Stretton mountains. Westwardly,

immediately on our left, the distance is more restricted, and the prospect is bounded by the wooded hill of Whitcliff and the other line of hill and forest which stretches through the sylvan wilds of Bingewood to the lovely scenery of Downton. Behind us, to the south, the Teme suddenly enters a deep and narrow ravine, formed by some convulsion of the ancient world, which cut off the knoll on which now stand castle and town, and gave it its picturesque character. Truly, with such attractions, and, I may add, many others of varying character, Ludlow ought to be the queen of our inland visiting places.

We will not on the present occasion loiter in the town, but let us for a moment look into the castle. A dark, stern, and not lofty or very shapely tower, fronting the open place of the town called Castle Street, and approached under the shade of a few trees, forms the portal to this noble ruin, and introduces us to the outer court —a vast space, surrounded on the north-east by a line of wall supported by towers, which joins the gateway tower just mentioned, and in its continuation round the southern side is lined by the ruins of buildings which are said to have formed stables, barracks, and other offices; while the north-western side of the court is formed by the line of the outer walls of the great mass of buildings which formed the Castle more properly so named. The walls are separated from the outer court by a wide and deep fosse, which was formerly crossed by a drawbridge, now superseded by a bridge of stone with two arches. We no sooner enter this great court by the outer gateway, than we behold opposite us a striking mass of buildings to which this bridge leads. Most conspicuous is the ancient Norman keep, rising in massive solidity above all the other towers of the castle. Adjoining to it, and opening upon the bridge, is the entrance to the interior of the castle, a gateway of much later date than the keep, and having over it windows of that style of architectural construction which points to the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In fact, this portion was built, or rebuilt, by one of the most distinguished of the English gentry of her reign, Sir Henry Sydney of Penshurst, who held the high office of Lord President of Wales and the Marches, in which capacity he resided

and held his court in Ludlow Castle, and who has told posterity, in a Latin inscription placed over the gateway arch, of querulous feelings, excited no doubt by popular ingratitude. It is hardly necessary to say that Sir Henry was the father of Sir Philip Sydney, the *preux chevalier* of his age, the poet, and lover of letters and men of letters, who was no doubt a frequent resident in Ludlow Castle, and probably there collected at times around him the Spensers, and the Raleighs, and the other literary stars of his day. This building appears to have been subsequently connected with English literature through another of its celebrated names. Sir Henry Sydney held the presidency of Wales from 1559 to 1581; during the Commonwealth period the court of Wades ceased virtually to exist, but it was revived at the Restoration, when the Earl of Carbery, the friend and patron of Butler, obtained the appointment. The earl took Butler with him as his secretary, and subsequently gave him the office of steward of Ludlow Castle, which he is known to have held in 1661. It was an old tradition that "Hudibras " was partly written in the room over the gateway of Ludlow Castle, as the residence allotted to the poet, and it seems to have been taken for granted that this meant the outward entrance by which we have just entered from Castle Street. But this must be a mere mistake. It is hardly probable that a room like that of the outer gateway tower, which is barely good enough for a porter, should have been given to a man who, besides his reputation as a poet and scholar, held the important office of secretary to the Lord President; and it is much more reasonable to suppose, that the room "over the gateway" inhabited by Butler, was that over the gateway into the inner court in the buildings for which the castle was indebted to Sir Henry Sydney, a view of which we present to thee, gentle reader, in the accompanying sketch.*

The gate is opened to us, and we pass through it into the inner court. Our first impression is that of being confounded with the view of the noble masses of ruins which surround us; but we will not stay to examine these in detail, or to mount the great keep tower on our left to contemplate from its summit the glorious panorama of plain and mountain which I have

described above, or even to visit the beautiful and interesting Norman circular chapel in the middle of the court.



Ludlow Castle.

Right in face of us we see a vast pile of buildings, consisting of what we may perhaps call two great agglomerations of towers, joined together by a curtain-wall, all exhibiting a high excellence of building and architectural ornamentation — probably built under the great and notorious Roger de Mortimer, the paramour of the queen of Edward II., who was lord of this castle. They constituted the state apartments of the Edwardian castle, and the apartments which they contain are all connected traditionally with names of princes and princesses, and lords and ladies of high degree in the olden time. And that curtain-wall, with its handsome polished windows, and its no less handsome doorway, approached by a long flight of steps, attracts us even more than the other parts of this pile of buildings, and we will visit it. As we approach it, we perceive that all the steps have been taken away,— they are said to have been made of marble. Through the arch of the doorway, singularly elegant in its forms and mouldings, you see the bare walls, floorless and roofless, of the grand hall of Ludlow Castle, the stage on

which was originally performed the most beautiful masque in our language, the "Comus" of Milton. We have no evidence whether Milton was or was not at Ludlow when the Masque of "Comus" was performed, but we know certainly from the title in the original edition, that it was "presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634, before the Earl of Bridgewater, then President of Wales." The occasion is said to have been to celebrate the appointment of that nobleman to his high office. The opposite wall of the hall of Ludlow Castle now remains only as a curtain wall between the two masses of towers; it stands upon the edge of the rock, and forms a very characteristic feature of the castle itself in the views taken from the outside, and especially from a distance. Now descend to the present floor, which is that, not of the Hall of Comus, but of the cellar beneath it; cross it, and clamber into one of the windows of the outer wall; and you will then see below and before you another scene, so lovely that it will hardly fail to snatch from you the exclamation that this was indeed, when in its glory, a hall worth assembling in. Their nearer proximity than when seen from the keep tower, makes the features of the landscape look richer and fairer as you trace Teme winding his course from Oakley Park down to the spot where he is going to throw himself into the ravine between the town and the hill of Whitcliff, before continuing his wanderings towards Worcestershire. We get a glimpse, too, of a part of the hill itself, and especially of that fine old fragment of a primeval forest which still conceals at some distance within its deepest recesses a spot more to be hallowed than the tower of "Hudibras," or the reminiscences of Sydneys and Spensers, or even than the Hall of Comus itself, — I mean the scene of the incident on which the plot of "Comus" was formed. We will, for the present, leave behind us castle and town, and pay a visit to this spot; it was my intention to lead my reader thither when I began writing this paper.

It was early in the past autumn that I last visited this spot, in company with that which makes all such excursions pleasant, a small party of agreeable friends. It was the time when the leaves begin to change their tints, and when a country like this, so covered with woodlands, is perhaps seen to

most advantage. The nearest way to the wood is by the road which crosses the Teme by the bridge under the castle, and instead of going up Whitcliff, — we are of course on foot, the only way to enjoy forest scenery, — we turn along the high road to the right, which, for a short space, borders upon the river, and then makes a turn by the side of some extensive stone quarries, a favourite point for a distant view of Ludlow Castle. The quarry is of interest to geological excursionists, for it is one of those Silurian beds of which Sir Roderick Murchison has told us so much, and which give so much interest to the Ludlow district, which are here capped by the Downton sandstone, and it is rather celebrated locally for the shells which are found abundantly in the latter. A few paces further, and we are at the edge of the wood, and we enter it by a gate of a country lane; but instead of pursuing this, we turn short to the left, and mount a steep and rather laborious path, but this is compensated by its shortness, which leads us into the upper road, the high road from Ludlow to Wigmore. We merely cross this road and again strike into the wood, bearing for some time along a much better path, which runs for a considerable distance parallel with the edge of the wood, though almost concealed among the thick hushes which line it on either side. When we have followed this path for somewhat more than three-quarters of a mile, we leave it at an angle to the right, and must trust for the rest to our own knowledge of the ground, or to that of a friendly companion who will be our guide. We are now indeed in the thick of the forest, with no path to guide us in our wanderings, and no prospect beyond the next bushes; and we cannot help experiencing somewhat of that elasticity of spirits and that feeling of mental and bodily freedom which made our forefathers in their enthusiasm give vent to such sentiments as those expressed by the early ballad writer in language simple yet the same time poetical: —

In somer, when the shawes be sheyne,
And leves be large and longe,
Hit is fulle mery in feyre foreste
To here the foulis songe.

To se the dere drawe to the dale,
And leve the hilles hee,
And shadow hem in the leves grene,
Under the grene wode tre.

So sung perhaps the earliest ballad-writer of the Robin Hood cycle whose compositions now remain — he belonged probably to an early part of the fifteenth century. All the ballads of what have been so long popular under the title of "Robin Hood's Garland," belong to a much later date; hardly any of them are older than the seventeenth century, and they have no doubt lost all the poetry which probably gave more grace if not more interest to those of an earlier period, yet for ages they preserved their popularity. The love of the "grene wode " seems to have continued so deeply planted in the heart of our race, probably since the time when the old Teuton looked upon the wild forest as his only natural place of residence, that even now, — when there are few driven to live in the green forests, and few forests are left for them to live in, — the "grene wode " still seems to convey to all people's minds those feelings of freedom and happiness which it did ever.

Yes, the shaws were "sheyne" (bright), and "large and long " were the leaves, as we sped on our way through the "grene wode " of Whitcliff on that pleasant September day; and full merrily did the "foulis" sing in every bush. We shall soon, too, see the completion of the old songster's picture, in the rushing of the wild deer of the forest to "shadow" themselves in the "leves grene." We meet with few other of the animals which formerly haunted these wild woods, except when we startle from its rest an occasional squirrel, or one of the smaller animals of prey. Now we cross a little open glade; next we have to push our way through masses of trees and underwood. These groups of trees and underwood, which surrounded and separated the glades, are what our forefathers called "shawes; " in the early romances, especially those which related to the wanderings and exploits of King Arthur's knights, when a knight conceals himself among the trees to withdraw from the view of other adventurers who are strangers to him,

until he has had the opportunity of reconnoitring them, he is said to "bide under shawe," or to "stande under shawe."

The tree most abundant in our forest is the oak, which has been termed the weed among trees in this part of the island. The oak trees in general overtop the shaws, but with them rise a multitude of other trees of less importance, and mostly well known. The sycamore also grows to considerable size. Among others more especially may be seen here the graceful birch, concerning which, Gerald, the father of herbalists, has handed down to us from the days of Elizabeth, as forming one of its chiefest "virtues" — for what plant or tree was without its virtues in those days? — "that its branches were then considered to be a very valuable corrective for boys at school;" and the no less elegant mountain-ash, with its clumps of bright red berries, beloved by birds. Hence the Germans call this tree Vogelbeerbaum, the bird-berry-tree. Under all these are great masses of trees of lower growth, and most conspicuous of all the hazel. Under our feet we are trampling upon the mass of bilberry bushes, which cover the ground in immense quantities, and look prettiest when they are covered with their small purple berries, of which, when we passed, only a few stragglers were here and there to be seen. I confess that I enjoy the peculiar feel and sound produced by trampling over the bilberry bushes as we wander through the solitude of the forest. They call them whimberries in Shropshire; they are named blaeberries, or blueberries, in the North and in Scotland; and they have other names in other parts of the island. They seem, indeed, to have been from early times a favourite shrub among the peasantry. They are supposed to be the vaccinia of which Virgil speaks as being prized in spite of their insignificant appearance, while the better-looking ligustra were treated with neglect—

O formose puer, nimium ne crede colori:
Alba ligustra cadunt, vaccinia nigra leguntur.
Eclog. II., 1. 18.

The word vaccinium was certainly interpreted by medieval writers as meaning a bilberry. The Anglo-Saxons seem to have considered the berries to have been a favourite food of the deer, for they called the fruit heorot-byrige, or heort-byrige, the hart's berry, and heorot crop, the hart's bunch (the Anglo-Saxon word crop meaning a bunch of berries). The later English names of whorts and whorth-berries, given to the bilberry by the old herbalists, was perhaps a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon name. The name of whortle-berry is now given to a species of blackberry, representing perhaps the heorot-brembel or hart's bramble, of the Anglo-Saxon physicians. The old herbalists recount numerous "virtues" of the bilberry; but two only appear now to be acknowledged: they are useful for making tarts, and for giving a fine rich purple tint to the fingers and lips of children. The latter quality is very apparent in the districts where they abound, during the period of their ripeness. Bilberries are not the only edible fruits (produced in the wood. Large straggling bramble-bushes, scrambling up the sides of the thickets, are laden with such rich bunches of extremely fine blackberries that we are tempted frequently to stop and rob them; wild strawberries of delicate flavour are abundant, and in some of the less frequented corners are found wild raspberries and barberries.

On we pass, now through wider glades where, in the forests of older times, a party of Robin Hood's men might perhaps have been found enjoying their meal; and now through smaller openings, in which we might almost expect to see Robin Hood himself start out upon us. It must be kept in mind that we have been all this time going up hill, though by a gentle slope. At length, after we have advanced through glade and through thicket, we suddenly emerge from the close wood, and find ourselves at the summit of a lofty and steep bank facing the south-west. Opposite us rises a much loftier hill, called the Vinnall Hill, the highest point of which, known as the High Vinnall, and celebrated as presenting from its summit one of the most magnificent views in this beautiful country, is just in front of us. Below us is a deep and beautiful valley, very narrow at first, but widening somewhat as it stretches eastward, and as thickly covered with wood as the part of the forest from

which we have emerged, having a small trickling stream, abounding in trout, running down its bottom. This stream bears the suggestive name of Sunny Gutter; the valley is the scene of "Comus." It may well be called, in the words of Milton, an "ominous wood," in which the enchanter dwelt,

In thick shelter of black shades imbower'd.

And in looking down into it we might imagine that still

Fairies at bottom trip
By dimpled brook and fountain trim.

We might even suppose that the guardian Shepherd must have occupied the very spot on which we are now standing, when he is made to describe himself as

Tending on flocks hard by i' th hilly crofts
That brow this bottom glade.

This "brow" continues westward until it becomes a part of the line of hills of Bringewood Chase. Hard by, the high road, which has just emerged from the wood, passes on its way to Wigmore, over a rise of the ground on which there is said to have been placed in former times a small cell with the figure of the Virgin, at which the traveller paid his devotions and made his offering; and hence the spot was called St. Mary's Knoll, corrupted into Maryknoll, the name by which it is still known. The scene of "Comus" is usually spoken of as Maryknoll Valley.

We have ourselves, as just stated, emerged from the wood upon a sufficiently extensive open space, which, as it extends on our right towards the head of the valley, begins to be divided by hedges; while, to the right, it is soon clothed with wood again. Our sudden appearance has roused a small party of wild deer, which dart off till they reach a secure distance, and then

turn and scan us with curious eyes. Trees and masses of bush are only scattered here and there over a grassy surface; and this circumstance, the character of the ground, and its significant name of Sunny Bank, indicate its richness in the wild flowers with which this locality abounds, and which are no longer concealed by the bilberries. We might well suppose, if we could believe that Milton had visited this scene, that this was the spot frequented by "a certain shepherd lad," who was

well skill'd
In every virtuous plant and healing herb
That spreads her verdant leaf to th' morning ray.

Among these "virtuous" plants, perhaps the most noticeable at the time of our visit was the agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*), which seems generally believed to be the haemony of the poet.

Among the rest, a small unsightly root,
But of divine effect, he cull'd me out;
The leaf was darkish, and had prickles on it,
But in another country, as he said,
Bore a bright golden flow'r, but not in this soil.

* *

He call'd it Haemony, and gave it me,
And bade me keep it as of sovran use
'Gainst all enchantments, mildew, blast, or damp,
Or ghastly furies' apparition.

I am not aware of any quality of this kind ascribed to the plant agrimony by the early writers on herbs. It was looked upon, from a very early date, as a sovereign remedy against wounds, and hence our Anglo-Saxon forefathers called it stic-wyrt meaning literally, painwort (stic was the Anglo-Saxon name for a sharp shooting pain, whence our stitch — as in the side). This quality it retains to the present day. Among our peasantry on the border

they use it "to strengthen the blood," as they say that it is a tonic, and also to stanch wounds. These qualities appear to have been known to animals as well as to mankind. Coles, in his "Adam in Eden" (1657), tells us, "It is said that deere, being wounded, cure themselves by eating hereof." The Anglo-Saxons had another name for agrimony, and apparently the name more generally in use, garclife, the first part of which appears to be the word gar, a spear, and no doubt therefore it bore allusion to its form. It is a spiry plant, rising straight up from the root, with small yellow flowers in a spike. The name, garclife continued to be given to it till the fourteenth century; but in the fifteenth it had been already superseded by its modern English name Agrimony, derived from the French herbalists. Another of the prettiest flowers to be seen in our route was Wood Betony, the queen of all "virtuous plants," the various qualities of which fill the pages of the old herbalist, and in some of them it resembles much more closely Milton's Haemony, than agrimony. The Anglo-Saxons seem to have had no name of their own for it; they merely used the Latin *betonica*. The oldest of their books on plants, of the tenth century probably, tells us that the plant betony "is good either for a man's soul or for his body; " and adds, that "it shields him against nocturnal apparitions, and against frightful visions and dreams." For this purpose it was to be gathered in the month of August, without the use of iron. It seems to have been considered a safe protector against spirits of another description; for we are informed in the same treatise, that if a man taste of this before he begin drinking strong drinks, he will not become drunk! The most graceful and fairy-like of all these plants is the *pyrola*, which, a little earlier than our visit, might have been seen about our sunny bank in abundance, though generally a rare plant, with its drooping bunches of bells like pearls tinged with pink. Though not in blossom at this time, its elegantly-formed leaves retain their glossy green the whole year round (whence its English name of winter-green), and show prettily among the yellow ferns and fallen foliage. Nor must we forget, among rarer plants, the Herb Paris, called in English, True-love, from its one pretty little flower, rising in the midst of its four curiously-placed leaves, set like love, according to rustic sentiment, in the centre of its affections. It is

tolerably common in these woods in damp and boggy places.

I must not dwell longer on the various interesting plants which are so abundant in this district, for we must make an effort to reach that lofty summit we see on the other side of the valley —the High Vinnall. I will not therefore describe the various wild flowers which are seen climbing over the hedges and bushes; one of the wild roses which had still a part of its bloom remaining, had strongly-scented leaves of bluish green, and very deep pink flowers. The wood-pimpernel shows its gem-like yellow flowers and trailing stems hardly rising from the ground. We are regaled as we pass along with the odours of the wild thyme, of a very large size, and of the wild spikenard. Ferns of the rarest kind, mosses, and lichens, abound on the banks of the valley, and by the margin of its diminutive stream. All these plants once had their virtues; some of them have lost them entirely, and there are others which, I am sorry to say, have become mischievous, and will not hesitate on an occasion to play their tricks upon travellers. Beware especially, O visitor to the scene of "Comus," of descending incautiously these banks, for their plants, however beautiful they may be to the sight, will sometimes conspire together to trip you over. Even the pretty little bluebells will turn treacherous on occasion, and not hesitate at times to lay their heads together to catch you by the toe. I know somebody who had experience of this, and might have said literally, in the words of Milton's Shepherd —

"Then down the lawns I ran with *headlong* haste."

But enough. We reach the foot of the bank with safety, push through a hedge, perhaps two, cross the Sunny Gutter by a jump or a stride, and make a turn to the left in order to mount the High Vinnall on the side where it appears to be most easily accessible. As we labour upwards, and from time to time halt to recover our breath, we cannot but feel the beauty of the scene, looking down, as we do, upon the tops of the trees, which are moving backwards and forwards like the waves of a green sea. At length we reach the top, and are amazed at the view which presents itself. To the

north, the long line of Bringewood just before us, and over it a distant sweep of Shropshire scenery; to the west and south, some of the richest and most picturesque districts of Herefordshire, stretching out to an extent which seems almost interminable; to the south-east, Shropshire again; even over the wooded hills on the other side of the Gutter, the Glee Hill presents itself to our sight in all its bulk. We remain till evening, and then descend to the ridge of the Vinnall, Hill, where a short walk down the side conducts us to the Hay Park, and we meet with a kind reception from excellent Captain Salwey, its proprietor. Hay Park is a very old house, beautifully situated on a considerable elevation, with fine distant prospects nearly all round. The park borders upon the wooded valley of the Sunny Gutter at its further extremity, the adjoining part of which is commonly called Hay Wood. The family of Salwey has been settled in this neighbourhood, at Richard's Castle and the Moor Park, from a rather remote period, but to whom the Hay Park belonged at the time when the Earl of Bridgewater was made lord president of Wales, I am not prepared to say. According to the traditional story, as I have heard it told, the earl's two sons, the Lord Brackley and Sir Thomas Egerton, with their sister, the Lady Alice, were on their way from Herefordshire to their father's court at Ludlow Castle, when they stopped at the Hay Park, and were detained there till night. In crossing through the wood at Ludlow, they lost their way in it, and the lady was for a while separated from her brothers. We, like them, were belated at the Hay Park, and night was already setting in when we left it. A few steps from the house brought us to the Wood, and by dint of following wise directions, we escaped their fate, and found our way through it, in spite of

Dim darkness and this leafy labyrinth.

It was fortunately still too early to expect the appearance of Comus and his band of revellers, and we reached the Hereford Road at Ludford, to re-enter Ludlow by a different side from that whence we started, less fatigued than, delighted with our day's excursion.

*In the inventory of furniture found in Ludlow Castle when it was in the hands of the Parliament, in 1650, printed in my "History of Ludlow" pp. 422—434. the steward's chamber is evidently spoken of as within the castle, and is described as so full of furniture that it must have been rather a large room. Adjoining to it were a closet, the steward's man's chamber, and the secretary's man's chamber, meaning, probably, what we should now call the assistant or under steward and the assistant-secretary. This would quite exclude all question of the outer gate-tower being Butler's residence.

Thomas Wright, F.S.A.

Once a Week, Jan 27, 1866.]

